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ABSTRACT

It is widely recognized that parents play a vital role in education, particularly in the literacy development of their children. Related research literature indicates that in terms of parent partnership in literacy education in New Zealand, partnership arrangements in the past have been inconsistent, and literacy initiatives at times have been less than effective and disappointing to both parents and teachers. This paper discusses some of the research findings suggesting that much of the guidance offered parents include setting guidelines and parameters for participation in the classroom and for at home support, and the pivotal role of teachers in involving parents. The paper also discusses teacher perceptions of their students' cultural diversity and how the timing of current research studies coincided with a period of major curriculum implementation in New Zealand schools. Children's writing generally seemed to be an area of concern and confusion for parents. Concern was also voiced by a number of parents that teachers seemed to assume that they knew about some basics of early literacy development because they were parents, when in fact, they often did not know. The research supports the incidental and informal nature of interaction and partnership initiatives, and the key to effective parent partnership in literacy education in the future seems to be to develop a positive and constructive means of intervention and support. The paper lists a core of ideas for effective partnership and gives suggestions for program implementation. Also discussed are implications for teacher education and professional development. Contains 43 references. (NKA)

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Parent Partnership in Literacy Education in the New Millennium: The Past, the Present, the Future.

by Marion Hartley

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Parent Partnership in Literacy Education in the New Millennium: The past, the present, the future.

The Past

It is widely recognised that parents play a vital role in education, particularly in the literacy development of their children. Related research literature indicates that in terms of parent partnership in literacy education, partnership arrangements in the past have been inconsistent and the literacy initiatives at times have been less than effective and disappointing to both parents and teachers (Cairney, 1997).

Current research literature (Arthur, 1996; Biddulph, 1993; Cairney and Munsie, 1992; Kohl, 1995; Lazar and Weisberg, 1996; Weinberger, 1995 and 1996; Wylie, 1994) and a Hamilton school-based thesis study (Hartley, 1998) indicate a core of common research findings about parent partnership in literacy education. Findings suggest that much of the guidance offered parents include setting guidelines and parameters for participation in the classroom and for at home support, under the direction of the school. Research findings also note the pivotal nature of teachers in involving parents in schools. While senior staff could be the driving force for organisation and ongoing support, the partnership was seen as unlikely to work without individual teachers implementing it through day-to-day practices in the classroom. Implementation of quality interaction in the classroom setting was usually at the discretion of the classroom teacher.

Most teachers in the studies considered appropriate guidance was provided. However, despite overall positive responses, not all of the parents were of the opinion that the level of guidance was comprehensive, clear cut, or provided the specific information they required about early literacy. These parents were concerned that

they might be responding inappropriately to their children's efforts and were in effect confusing the children.

Although it was generally recognised that parent partnership policy had evolved over a period of time, the major impetus had been through school initiatives related to school reform measures and curriculum implementation. Partnership policy generally seemed to be based on the caring nature of teaching staff. While both parents and teachers supported the concept of partnership, they also acknowledged the complexity of the idea in practice. Teachers and parents claimed that regardless of policy, the climate of the school started in the classroom, with individual teacher initiatives crucial to the implementation and maintenance of parent and teacher partnership.

Cultural diversity

Teacher perceptions of how the different cultural and language backgrounds of children were catered for, tended to be positive, based on strong teacher empathy with the children and what their needs might be. Despite this apparent optimism, catering for cultural and linguistic difference seemed to be an area where teachers and parents were least confident in articulating responses. Teachers in the main, saw this diversity being addressed through individual goal setting and the individualised nature of the programmes.

While this may reflect sound educational practice, it is problematic in that it could mask the unique family and cultural literacies of individual children and inadvertently overlook the importance of this dimension in responding to the child's individual needs. Subsequent failure to build on previous home and community based literacy learning could result in missed opportunities for authentic literacy experiences at school and add to discontinuity between home and school practices.

This is of particular concern in view of the New Zealand research by Wilkinson (1997) which considered the impact of diversity on achievement in literacy education indicating that parental Cupertino and the teacher's capacity to handle diversity, were in large measure, factors moderating achievement gaps in literacy education.

This research also revealed that there were limits to what teachers could do. Many teachers were struggling to cope with the growing diversity among students, under conditions which made it increasingly difficult for them to be responsive to individual needs. These findings appear to suggest increasing difficulty for teachers for whom the individualised nature of their programme is the main method of addressing the range of diversity in their classrooms.

Impact of curriculum.

The timing of current research studies which coincided with a period of major curriculum implementation, undoubtedly influenced the responses of participants. Curriculum evenings appeared to have taken the place of more 'hands on' parent teacher meetings, which had been valued by parents in the past. While most parents appreciated the informative nature of curriculum meetings, these did not appear to address parents' immediate or ongoing queries about literacy education for their children.

Teachers unanimously attributed this lapse to:

- involvement in implementing new curriculum initiatives;
- ongoing requirements of professional development in different curriculum areas;
- school-wide and syndicate commitments; and
- the effort to remain innovative in their planning and teaching while addressing the documentation required for accountability, all of which has been extremely demanding.

Teachers reported that a return to some of their former practices could be timely and worthwhile. Precedence given to curriculum implementation over interacting with parents in the individual interests of their children, seems to have been counter productive in terms of parent partnership initiatives, at least in the short term.

Children's writing

Children's writing generally seemed to be an area of concern and a cause of confusion. Most parents reported that they were reasonably comfortable about supporting their children's reading but a number of them expressed concerns about their children's writing. This appeared to be a consequence of either, a lack of communication, or a misunderstanding between the ideas of the parents and the way writing is currently taught in schools.

Teachers expressed concern about some parents' negative responses and attitude to their children's efforts at writing, especially in the emergent stages. Teachers were also concerned about parents undermining their efforts with out dated attitudes. While most parents claimed that they supported an emergent literacy approach, many of them reported that they had difficulty accepting conventions such as 'invented spelling' or 'temporary spelling.'

Assumptions about 'what parents know'

Concern was reported by a number of parents that teachers seemed to assume that they knew about some basics of early literacy development because they were parents, when in fact, they often did not know. At times the parents had to make assumptions about what was expected of them , in terms of responding to their children's reading and writing efforts at home. Some parents also lacked the confidence to approach teachers to discuss concerns or communicate their needs.

While some information about new methods of literacy learning had filtered into the children's homes from school, this was not consistent, nor was it fully understood. Apart from formal consultation, teachers tended to wait for parents to take the initiative and ask about literacy. This form of contact relies on a level of confidence and some understanding of literacy learning on the part of the parents. Consequently, some parents received considerably more information than others, with those parents who could have benefited most from information and dialogue with teachers, the least likely to receive it.

Parents who did not have regular contact with teachers expected to be contacted if there were problems. However, for children experiencing difficulties, parent teacher dialogue tended to be limited and often had to be instigated by the parent. Parents, while encouraged to approach the school if they had any problems, appeared to be unsure whether it was appropriate to do this if they did not have particular problems. The underlying assumption for both parents and teachers appeared to be that if there were problems they would be addressed. Silence implied satisfaction.

The complexity of the relationships in parent teacher partnership

Over time, teacher and parent responses indicated a range of nuances about partnership. These ranged from the training of parents in basic skills to support teachers, to partnership as an empowering process based on a changed way of thinking about schooling, to ensure that all families have access to quality learning experiences. Most responses related to involvement in school programmes, or supporting these programmes with appropriate home activities. This reflects a restricted view of partnership, based largely on a traditional view of involving parents at the school's discretion and direction, rather than a collaborative vision of

partnership, in which family practices and school practices could be shared and modified in the best interests of the child.

The incidental and informal nature of interaction and partnership initiatives are a feature of research findings, yet current research, in both literacy learning and school effectiveness indicates that informal partnerships between parents and teachers without the necessary agendas and organisation to make it work, can result in pressure groups and disillusionment. Comprehensive decision making at the school administrative level is needed, to support teachers in classroom practices that encourage parent partnership initiatives within school reform (Chrispeels, 1996; Coleman, Collinge and Tabin, 1996; Merttens, Newland and Webb, 1996; Webster, Beveridge and Reed, 1996).

While there is encouraging research about the potential for wider interpretation of parent partnership in literacy education (Cairney, 1994 and 1997; Edwards, 1995; McNaughton, 1995), a number of researchers caution that some programmes are potentially flawed because they are 'for' parents not 'by' parents. These researchers claim that results are inconsistent, and they suggest that it would be unwise to prematurely accept claims of effectiveness, when in fact there is little research evidence of this (Cairney, 1994; Rasinksi, 1989; Wasik, 1998).

Considerations for the future

The key to effective parent partnership in literacy education in future seems to be to develop a positive and constructive means of intervention and support. For effective partnership parents need to know that their role in literacy is valued. They need to be encouraged to become acquainted with the complexities of literacy learning and to work in tandem with the school, in the best interests of their children (Cairney and

Munsie, 1992; Merttens et al., 1996; Richgels and Wold, 1998; Toomey and Allen, 1991; Weinberger, 1995 and 1997).

Effective partnership needs to be based on a core of ideas which guide parental involvement. These include:

- 'parents' include all family members and adults who are the primary caregivers for their children;
- parents care for their children and their caring is demonstrated in different ways;
- parents are critical partners in the process of children's learning;
- parents and teachers working together can provide total linguistic, cultural and educational support for children; and
- parents can help educators understand the cultural diversity of the children in their care (Flood and Lapp, 1995).

Suggestions for programme implementation could include:

- establishment of programme goals which meet the needs of the school and of families;
- involving parents and school personnel in initiation, planning and implementation of programmes;
- a variety of parent involvement activities;
- greater use of home visits to involve parents who do not necessarily respond to invitations or messages from school; and
- the need to ensure a flexible parent tutoring component as part of the programme (Epstein and Dauber, 1991).

Schools could consider setting up key groups of parents and teachers to assist with communication about curriculum, in a way that acknowledges the credibility that parents can provide for school initiatives in the community. This could also include, representatives from ethnic community groups to encourage greater involvement. A

teacher in a position of responsibility, with allocated release time from teaching duties could be responsible for parent partnership and liaison initiatives in the school. The opportunity to develop and co-ordinate a range of parent partnership initiatives and ongoing opportunities for dialogue, could help to provide status for parent partnership and a focus for ongoing development.

In order to allay concerns about children's emergent literacy, there seems to be a need to communicate regularly and clearly about the emergent stages of children's literacy. This communication also needs to inform parents about how they can help move the children through developmental stages in useful and enjoyable ways. Adaption of parent tutoring programmes (Biddulph, 1983 and Glynn and Medcalf, 1997), to involve the parents in practical workshops, could be a useful approach to address the needs of parents. This could be a cost effective way to increase parent involvement in school activities, while providing specialised support for developing students' literacy skills.

Teachers need to initiate frequent, easily understood communication with parents in a number of ways, but most importantly through discussion and in a range of media which could include:

- newsletters;
- 'good news' telephone calls;
- school activities;
- open house days;
- family/whanau meetings; and
- school community bulletin boards.

The development and use of information technology could include:

- email;
- voice mail messages; and

videos of literacy interaction in the classroom.

The provision and co-ordination of transport and day care services in relation to the timing of activities could also provide greater flexibility in the level of involvement for parents across a wider range of activities.

Implications for teacher education and professional development

Teacher educators, teachers and administrators, must act to ensure that parent partnership is addressed in preservice education and in the professional development of teachers. While preservice teacher training and ongoing professional development of teachers has emphasised understanding of the content and process of learning, Wylie (1994) suggests that "working with parents translating the work of the school into the terms of the home and vice versa, is the next frontier to be crossed" (p.4).

There is a need for researchers and teacher educators to help teachers understand the multiple literacy environments from which their children come and how to use this information to foster effective home and school communication (Cairney, 1994; Cazden, 1988 and 1992; Edwards, 1995; Luke, 1993; McNaughton, 1995; Merttens, 1996; Morrow ed., 1995; Weinberger, 1995 and 1996).

Teachers will increasingly need to recognise that while some parents support an emergent literacy perspective, other parents hold more traditional views. Teachers will also need to acknowledge that emergent literacy reflects a particular cultural and family perspective and encourage parents to support their children's literacy learning at home in ways familiar to them, although these practices might be in conflict with the teacher's own beliefs. This issue is too complex to attempt to provide simplistic solutions. The challenge for teachers in future will be to critically reflect on these beliefs and to develop programmes that accommodate diversity, without

compromising their own principles of literacy learning and teaching (Anderson, 1995; Anderson and Gunderson, 1997).

In view of this it is important for research, teacher training and the professional development of teachers to include the study of the skills and support needed by teachers to help them work effectively with parents. There is also a need for a clearer understanding of the policies and actions which support school-wide change and in classroom practices which involve teachers, parents, children and their communities in a learning partnership.

Teacher training and professional development of teachers needs to be provided in:

tutoring programmes for parents;
consultation methods;
communication systems;
negotiation skills;
speaking to groups;
preparing and leading staff and syndicate meetings,
presenting ideas in written form in a variety of ways; and
ways to involve diverse cultural communities.

This needs to acknowledge the practices of the diversity and recognise that the diversity within cultural groups and families are also different. Teachers also need to be aware of how to access the expertise located in families and in the community (Chrispeels, 1996; Coleman, 1997; Cooper and Whitehead, 1996). Within the current climate of expectations of parent teacher partnership it is also important to assist teachers establish realistic initiatives to ensure a productive balance between time spent working with parents and the direct benefits this brings to children's learning (Hancock, 1998).

Current government initiatives include a Literacy and Numeracy Strategy that aims

> *by 2005 to have every child turning nine able to read, write and do maths proficiently.*

Associated government literacy initiatives, The Literacy Taskforce Report (1999) and the Literacy Experts Group Report (2000) recommendations appear to support the suggested considerations for the future and implications for teacher education and professional development, in terms of social and cultural influences on literacy.

- Recommendation 6 of The Literacy Experts Group Report to The Secretary for Education (2000) cites a sound research base to indicate that

  > *family practices of literacy have a major impact on children's achievement at school...and that schools can effectively foster family participation in a number of ways...that guidance which builds on cultural processes (such as recognising the diversity in ways of teaching and learning) and adds to family literacy (rather than undermines culturally based practices such as learning to recite texts) are effective (February 2000, pp 13-14).*

- The taskforce affirmed two-way partnerships between parents and schools and between schools an early childhood services. They also recommended improved co-ordination between social agencies that support families at risk.

It is important to note that the Literacy Experts Group Report acknowledges that New Zealand schools in general teach literacy effectively in many areas. The group does not recommend a radical shift in what is considered sound and established literacy teaching practice. However, they do recommend a need for teachers to use a variety of techniques in teaching children to read and a refocusing on specific aspects for improving children's literacy skills. These include:

- instruction in phonological awareness; and

- further fostering of family participation in children's literacy learning, before school and at school.

There has been a positive response from teachers and principals to the initiatives that have resulted from the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, with many educators keen to examine their own school's literacy programme, including parent partnership initiatives.

The year 2000 includes a boost for school literacy programmes with professional development programmes, new literacy resources and further additions to *Feed the Mind* the public information campaign linked to the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy

- The national professional development programme, organised by Learning Media for Year 2000, aims to ensure that schools have nationally consistent understandings of literacy learning and teaching and raising the levels of achievement across students in Years 1-4

- The higher profile of literacy and numeracy in Years 1-4 has already resulted in the National Administration Guidelines being modified to ensure that schools focus on literacy and numeracy in their monitoring of children's learning over the first four years of schooling. To support the revised National Administration Guidelines the professional development programme workshops in term two will initially address principals of schools with children in Years 1-4. Key issues to be explored include best practice in New Zealand schools; development of a literacy vision for the specific needs of their schools; guidance for literacy programmes; and appropriate procedures to review their existing programmes. Follow up workshops will target familiarisation with new literacy resources to be published this year and improve in-depth assistance and advice to schools. Sixteen regional facilitators will target 300 schools in year 2000 and 300 in year

2001 to review literacy programmes, develop literacy vision in collaboration with major stakeholders and initiate and review classroom initiatives to ensure these visions are realised (Education Gazette 24 January 2000, 79, 1, pp1-6).

- Schools and their school communities appear to be developing initiatives which reach a wider pool of children, sometimes across a cluster of schools, involve a group of teachers, and utilise a range of teacher talent and expertise.
- Some schools have already begun the process of developing full service schooling with health and social workers and other service providers.
- A key idea in school initiatives is to have a resource person, skilled in literacy education to co-ordinate school literacy development, to continue staff professional development and monitor progress.
- There is also a strong focus on the quantity and quality of early childhood education and efforts to improve the schools' links with early childhood centres, to track achievement levels and develop cumulative literacy profiles, important at times of transition to school. School, parent and community communication is a major factor in this and a range of nation-wide initiatives .
- Intervention Pre-school Preparation and Transition to School Programmes which target preschool children and their parents, to help parents assist with the development of literacy and numeracy skills prior to school entry, involve community groups and encourage a range of innovative partnership initiatives.
- Many of the early childhood primary link projects in throughout New Zealand are also working closely with local educational colleagues in schools and colleges of education, in research programmes, to gather entry level data and monitor progress.
- Efforts to provide quality education as part of a team effort, focused on the student, through a holistic approach and a philosophy of empowering students to become self motivated and responsible for their own behaviour emphasise strong motivation for parent involvement, including compulsory parenting programmes

and compulsory parent tutoring in literacy and numeracy, to support their children at home.

- A range of initiatives are developing within the SEMO Project (Strengthening Education in Mangere and Otara Schools Project) and the Early Childhood Primary Links Project, operating in conjunction with SEMO. Focussed early instruction in literacy education in the first year of school is a key component of the pilot programme for teachers of children in the first year of school, initiated by the Woolf Fisher Research Centre of the University of Auckland. Initial response to these developments has provided a focus for a wider group of schools to become involved in similar professional development programmes for teachers, through the Literacy Strategy proposals, and to extend the focus through Years 1-4 of schooling.

- A network of initiatives including the Third Choice Reading Project funded from the Ministry of Education funding and Child Literacy Foundation, story reading research projects at on-school site kindergartens and Pre-school Library Home Borrowing Services at Family Service Centres, also part of the on-school site development. The Alan Duff 'Books in Homes' and the newly introduced 'Kids at Home' programmes also support parent partnership in schools.

Concluding comments

Parents can no longer be viewed as passive clients, prepared to leave something as valuable as their children's education entirely to the teachers. Partnership needs to be based on the premise that parents are natural and inevitable partners in children's learning and that effective two way partnership recognises that parents and teachers have shared responsibility and rights in the education of children (Brown, 1997; Crump, 1996; Farnsworth, 1996; Merttens et al., 1996).

"The development of partnership is a process, not a single event" (Epstein, 1995, p.710). However, family and social practices can only influence what happens in schools when schools are aware of and open to such influences. By developing closer relationships with our communities, parents can gain realistic insights into what it is that teachers do to support learning and teachers can learn enough about the diversity of family language, literacy and culture to develop the responsive curricula and classroom programmes required if children are to have equal opportunities to learn and succeed (Cairney, 1997; McNaughton, 1995).

Parent partnership in literacy education cannot be regarded as a quick fix, nor does it come with any guarantees. Teachers, parents, caregivers, whanau and the wider community need to be open to change and prepared to move out of their current 'comfort zones.' Teachers in future will increasingly need to view parents and community groups as sources of learning and support.

Schools are increasingly a focal point for developing and sustaining a sense of community. The efforts that schools are undertaking to restructure the school learning environment present opportunities to rethink and restructure home, school and community partnership. In the short term the beneficiaries will be the parents and the teachers. The ultimate beneficiaries will be the children, learning to be literate in an increasingly complex world.

"Finally, you can change the rules, reform the systems, and legislate for provision. But it is the heads and hearts of teachers that real change and genuine response must take place and this remains the biggest challenge" (Middleton, 1996). Certainly this is a major challenge for teachers, administrators and teacher educators, as we attempt to redefine parent partnership as an integral part of a new story which could well begin: *"Once upon a millennium..."*

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